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Voice of America complaints create 'furor,' memo says

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Washington—Complaints from U.S. officials about Voice of America broadcasting have "created a difficult psychological atmosphere which increases the danger of self-censorship," according to an internal newsletter circulated this week.

It cited a resulting "almost self-conscious tendency to avoid the controversial, to play it safe, to lay low until the furor blows over."

That "furor" is an "open debate on VOA's purposes and methods," which the newsletter says has been prompted by a series of protests about minor errors and larger policy questions at the government radio service.

James Conkling, a California entertainment executive who became VOA director three months ago, told a staff interviewer that the complaints did not add up to "a concerted effort" to limit the Voice's independence.

Rather, he said, they are partly attributable to "new ambassadors . . . often unknowledgeable in the beginning. They're sensitive to criticism themselves, so if they see anything that's sensitive, they will complain about it so they are protected."

Partly, Mr. Conkling said, "it is the pressure of a new administration." And "part of it is uncertainty on what this administration is."

The ruckus has restarted a long-running controversy about whether the Voice should operate more like an independent news station or like a government propaganda medium.

VOA professionals have insisted that loss of objectivity would mean loss of credibility for their worldwide broadcasts. But some officials in a series of administrations have maintained that there is no reason to run the service if it does not hew to the current version of U.S. policy.

Nervousness started rising at VOA before the latest administration moved in: when close Reagan insiders said a more assertive ideological line would be pushed to parallel the change in foreign policy.

The staff newsletter, distributed Wednesday, pointed to half a dozen examples of the complaints that have elevated that nervousness into a "difficult psychological atmosphere." It said:

The White House and some U.S. embassies protested a July broadcast citing American media reports saying the CIA supplied arms to Afghan rebels.

Last month, the Manila Embassy expressed concern over broadcasts about refugees departing Vietnam. It recommended that Indochinese not be encouraged to flee their homelands.

The Moscow Embassy complained in August that VOA English-language programs gave air time to Soviet spokesman Georgi Arbatov. The section was asked fr

The Geneva Embassy protested that VOA called Afghan nationalists "anti-government guerrillas," apparently because that implied the Soviet-supported regime is the legitimate government in Kabul.

The embassy in Sri Lanka complained that a VOA newscast called a U.S. jet fighter a "warplane," saying the word put this country in a bad light.

And also last month, VOA's news division was asked to provide an open microphone for a State Department official to comment on El Salvador. The division refused and later interviewed the official on the condition that the news branch retain editorial control.

This week's newsletter did not mention other incidents, including the reported killing of an analysis on the neutron bomb debate that was considered too realistic in describing the bomb's effects. Nor did it say that Richard V. Allen, national security adviser, reprimanded Mr. Conkling and his boss, Charles Z. Wick, director of the International Communications Agency, about a story on Afghanistan.

Mr. Conkling was president of BEI Productions, Inc., which develops "motion picture and television concepts," before coming to VOA. He is a longtime friend of Mr. Wick, a California businessman who is in turn a close friend of the president. Mark Willen, a VOA editor, interviewed him for the news division's house publication, *NewsRoom*.

The director conceded that he did not yet have a clear statement of VOA's purpose, but that "we are one of the few voices of truth that exists and we have to keep it a voice of truth. We're going to have problems once in a while."

He said that giving Soviet spokesman Arbatov a disproportionate share of time on a program that also carried President Reagan's comments on the other side of the issue was one serious complaint.

Another, not previously mentioned by the newsletter, was VOA use of the phrase "two countries" to describe China and Taiwan. While that might not be a mistake, he said, "It's a matter of taste. There's no sense going out and offending people."

Mr. Conkling also brought up a complaint from the ambassador of El Salvador after a broadcast referred to a transport helicopter used there as a "gunship." He said the envoy claimed that "it offended the people in power who sent the helicopters out."

Admitting that "I've got to learn the news end of the business," Mr. Conkling said that in non-news VOA programming he sometimes heard "triviality" that should be changed.

Programming should be modernized to attract 16-to-32-year-old listeners who are "going to be the leaders some day," he added.

The director said he withdrew his request for the names of people who worked on the Arbatov show after his acting program manager, Cliff Groce, a 30-year VOA veteran, said it "sounds very much like the McCarthy era."

Mr. Groce said yesterday that he had mentioned the late Senator Joseph R. McCarthy in a memo, warning of what could happen in the future. (The senator inspired a hunt for Communists in government in the early 1950s.)

Mr. Conkling said he understood that VOA staff might have taken the request that way. But he said that "in the business I [was] in, you do it all the time. You don't mean 'I'm going to go out and cut that guy's throat.' You may say, 'I'm not going to use him for rhythm tunes anymore.'"

The director denied knowing anything about any move to change the 1976 VOA charter, which calls for "accurate, objective and comprehensive" news and a "balance" of opinion.

Asked whether he liked his job, he said, "Not yet. I like some of it. I would like it to be a friendlier atmosphere, a less suspicious atmosphere, an area where people are happier for a change, and mostly where they feel encouraged."